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Pulling the plug on the Sandinistas

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What can the Reagan administration do between now and March (when Congress reconsiders aid to the Contras) to salvage its limping anti-Sandinista policy?

It can announce its intention of withdrawing diplomatic recognition from the Sandinista government unless and until that government agrees to carry out all the promises it made to the Organization of American States in 1979 to provide democratic freedoms to the Nicaraguan people.

Threatened withdrawal of diplomatic recognition is not a warlike act. It is, rather, an expression of disapproval of the character of a regime conveying a message similar to that recently expressed by the president in regard to South Africa.

Threatened withdrawal of diplomatic recognition of Nicaragua's government is, moreover, conditional merely upon the Sandinistas complying with their own promise solemnly given to the OAS in exchange for the de-legitimization of the Somoza government of Nicaragua by the member states of the OAS, including the United States. The proposed policy would thus echo the Sandinistas' own moral position.

On what ground could the president's opponents attack this proposed initiative?

On the ground that, once installed, a Marxist-Leninist regime — unlike a right-wing dictatorship — is sacrosanct? On the ground that the recent elections in Nicaragua accurately reflected the will of the Nicaraguan people? On the ground that the OAS action of 1979 was an illegitimate act and cannot be repeated?

There is no solid moral or legal

ground on which to oppose such a policy. Opponents of the policy would be forced to assert — in the face of evidence to the contrary — that the Sandinista regime is the legitimate democratic representative of the Nicaraguan people.

Alternatively, opponents would be forced to assert that the introduction of democracy so vociferously demanded in South Africa and Chile, for example, should not be sought in a Marxist-Leninist state.

The announcement of the policy proposed would not foreclose any option now available to the administration, including unilateral use of force. It would, however, provide a moral and legal basis for the application of sanctions that (opponents have argued) have in the past been taken in technical violation of laws and treaties.

Will the opponents of the proposed policy challenge the proposition that the Nicaraguan people have a right to determine — and to continue to determine in free elections — who their leaders shall be?

Do the opponents of the proposed policy question the right of the Nicaraguan people to "alter or to abolish" their government "and to institute new government" when they feel their government "becomes destructive" of the principle that "governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed"?

If they do, such critics are chal-

lenging the very words of our own Declaration of Independence and the very basis on which Americans, with the aid of France and Spain, were able to establish their own democracy.

For too long, congressional critics have been allowed to snipe at administration policy in Nicaragua on grounds that "covert" aid to the opponents of the present regime violated U.S. law, that the mining of Nicaraguan harbors to interdict the growing shipments of Soviet-bloc arms violated international law, and that U.S. sponsorship of a psychological warfare manual for rebel use constituted support of international terrorism.

As a result, the administration finds itself dragged into the World Court as an aggressor nation, finds its covert aid to the anti-Sandinistas cut off (even while its covert aid to Afghan rebels is approved by Congress), and even its policy of supporting the elected government of neighboring El Salvador called in question.

The proposed policy declaration would force the opponents of the president's policy to debate the morality of our position in Central America on more favorable grounds. At the same time, it would constitute a psychological warning to the Sandinistas, and a legal basis in which subsequent acts of support to Nicaraguan opponents of the regime could be based.

Perhaps, by March, support for a democratic Nicaragua will emerge.

Wilcomb E. Washburn is director of the Office of American Studies of the Smithsonian Institution. The views expressed in this article are his own.